

DECISION NOTICE
BIG LAKE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA
Agricultural Lease Renewal Proposal

PROPOSAL

FWP proposes to modify and renew an agricultural lease with a local rancher (lessee) for mowing services of an access road and parking areas used by FWP and the public to decrease fire fuels and the potential for wild fires within the WMA and to maintain and improve waterfowl, upland bird, and wildlife habitat. This new lease would run for 6 years. It would begin May 1, 2019 and expire April 30, 2025. The access road and parking areas would be mowed once each summer to reduce fire danger and make the access road and parking areas more passable for recreationists visiting the WMA. Need for mowing, and mowing dates, would be determined annually by mutual agreement of the lessee and FWP managing biologist. Mowing need and mowing dates would be dependent on spring and summer precipitation and temperatures. Mowing of access road and parking areas may not be needed every year.

In exchange for availability to mow the access road and parking areas once annually, the lessee would be allowed to cut and bale up to 20 acres of hay annually within two areas targeted for haying on the WMA. Both areas were in agricultural production when the WMA was purchased. After purchase, they were planted with a dense nesting cover mix. This mix consists of tall and intermediate wheat grass, alfalfa and sweet clover. Specific areas to cut within the 'acres targeted for haying' would be determined annually by the WMA managing biologist in a three-year rotational manner. Approximately 1/3 of the 'acres targeted for haying' would be hayed annually. When an area is hayed, that specific area would not be hayed again for two years. Haying would occur between July 15th and August 31st.

The lessee would be required to remove all baled hay from the WMA by August 31. Both areas targeted for haying may be rolled using tractor and roller once during the lease period to maintain the field surfaces, so they can be effectively hayed. Rolling would occur in early spring and would be completed on or before April 1 to avoid disturbance to waterfowl and upland bird nests.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Big Lake Wildlife Management Area agricultural lease renewal proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment dated October 2018.

A 30-day public comment period ran from November 1 to November 30, 2018. Public notices of the draft Agricultural Lease Renewal Proposal and Environmental Assessment were placed on the FWP web site, were announced in a news release to the area and statewide newspaper outlets and sent to interested parties via on the FWP Region 5 EA mailing list (State Library, Stillwater Co. Commissioners, Stillwater Co. Conservation District, EQC, DEQ, local Conservation Groups, private landowners adjacent to Big Lake WMA, etc.). Hard copies were available at the FWP Region 5 Office in Billings and were offered via mail and email upon request.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Solicitation of public input resulted in the receipt of one comment from a private individual. This comment was received as an email response. This comment supported the proposed lease renewal. Following is the verbatim comment received during the comment period.

1. From: Bert Otis (otisranch@wispwest.net)
Date: 11/12/2018 6:53 AM
To: Paugh, Justin;

Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission,
I support the Big Lake Agriculture Lease. It's clearly a win/win for all parties. Maybe in the future the haying, could be expanded and would even be better. What some people don't understand is the haying also helps control weeds, so there's another benefit.
Bert Otis, Emigrant, MT

DECISION

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis, project plan and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Given results of FWP's analysis coupled with the nature of the public comment, acceptance of this agricultural lease renewal proposal on the Big Lake Wildlife Management Area is warranted. After review of this proposal and the corresponding public support and comment, it is my recommendation that FWP proceed with the agricultural lease renewal as described on the Big Lake Wildlife Management Area. This Decision Notice will be provided to the Fish & Wildlife Commission for a final decision to approve/disapprove the proposed lease at their regularly scheduled meeting April 25, 2019.

Signed,

Barb S. Beck
Region 5 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
2300 Lake Elmo Dr.
Billings, MT 59105
(406) 247-2940
bbeck@mt.gov